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Corzine says victims' plight may fade from headlines

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Wednesday, January 12, 2005

By ANDREW GLAZER
STAFF WRITER

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka - Fresh from touring areas damaged by last month's tsunamis, U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine on Tuesday commended the world's response to the disaster but said he worries that aid will taper off once attention drifts to the next big story.

The rushing waters that killed more than 30,000 Sri Lankans and a total of 150,000 in 11 nations receded weeks ago. But more than a half-million remain homeless in Sri Lanka alone.

Many lost their livelihoods and are scraping by on food handouts in refugee camps set up in Buddhist temples, mosques and schools. Close living quarters in the camps and the coming rainy season have health officials worried about an outbreak of disease.

On the third leg of a four-country tour, the New Jersey Democrat - as part of a congressional delegation - flew in a military helicopter down the Indian Ocean coast to the city of Galle. The mission was to assess how to help South Asia rebuild now that the emergency search and rescue mission is over.

After a briefing by officials from the U.S. Embassy, representatives reported visiting a refugee camp set up in an elementary school in the country's south, watching a detachment of Marines clear a pile of debris from a coastal community and speaking to many families of fishermen who lost loved ones.



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Residents of the camp rely on food from the government and volunteer organizations, and will likely remain there until they receive money to rebuild their homes and businesses.

"We've done a wonderful job with the emergency response, but how do we sustain this, how do we get into long-term reconstruction?" asked Corzine, who is running for New Jersey governor. "These are long-term things. These people aren't going to get back to work anytime soon. Military is OK, but I'd probably rather have the Army Corps of Engineers than the Marines."

He urged international lending institutions, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, to consider relieving the affected countries of their debts to help them recover in the long run.

"These countries would be greatly served by unburdening them from debt payment," he said. "Congress can play a role. I think it would make a major difference if we used our good offices to get the IMF to forgive them."

Corzine and other delegates began their tour of the damage in South Asia on Saturday with a helicopter flight over Aceh province in Indonesia, where more than 105,000 people died.

They toured the battered beach resorts of Thailand, where forensic investigators are trying to identify the bodies of thousands of tourists. They arrived in Sri Lanka on Monday and are scheduled to fly to India today. Representatives from New Jersey visiting Sri Lanka include Scott Garrett, R-Wantage; Frank Pallone Jr., D-Long Branch; Mike Ferguson, R-Warren Township, and Chris Smith, R-Hamilton Township.

"Everyone you talk to has a very sad story," said Pallone, co-chairman of the Congressional Caucus on Sri Lanka. "A mother who lost her child. A husband who lost his wife. Fishermen without nets or boats."

Garrett joined the delegation here Monday. Also a member of the Congressional Caucus on Sri Lanka, he last visited in 2003, shortly after the Sinhalese-controlled government signed a cease-fire with rebels from the Tamil ethnic minority. Friends here joked that it took a tsunami to bring him back, he said.

He, too, feared that attention from the media, volunteer organizations and foreign governments would go elsewhere in coming weeks and that the hundreds of thousands of homeless and jobless would be forgotten.

"I cynically told my colleagues no one will be back until there's a cholera outbreak in the camps," he said.

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